

Saving Face

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The bell above the shop door tinkled. Winston looked up in surprise. It was February, it was Tuesday, and it was raining -- the hard cold downpour that made all but the hardiest locals complain. Tourists rarely came to Seavy Village in February, and if they did, they spent most of their time holed up in a hotel room staring at the ocean. They certainly didn't come to a run-down magic store in a run-down part of town.

"Hey, big guy." Ruby, his familiar, stood underneath the beaded curtain that hid the back lab from the storefront. She was still a kitten, although she didn't talk like one. She never had, really. But she was healthier than she had been when he found her. Her black coat shone now, and she had the lanky swagger most normal six-month olds had. "You got a customer."

"Thanks, Ruby," he said softly and got up from his stool. His back hurt. He'd been mixing potions all morning, filling mail orders that would go out in the afternoon's UPS. The summertime tourist trade supplemented his income. He kept the store for them, but with the advent of the internet, he really didn't need the extra advertising. The store just gave him and Ruby a place to spend their days.

He walked through the beaded curtain and stopped as he entered the narrow storefront. A woman stood near the dirty display window, studying a shelf of cut glass potion bottles. All were empty and most were antiques, things he had acquired in trade or found in the junk shops that ran along this stretch of Highway 101.

She looked up when she saw him. She was slight, with oval-shaped brown eyes hidden by large glasses. Her dark hair was pulled away from her face, in a style too severe for her round features. Still, he could see, no matter how hard she tried to hide it, she was very beautiful.

"Are you Winston?" she asked.

He nodded, his heart in his throat. People never came to the store looking for him. They came to find baubles, silly souvenirs from their vacations.

Ruby had come up beside him. She leapt on the counter and lay across it. She knew his history, knew that he had run from San Francisco twenty years before with the police on his heels. He'd always tried to convince himself that no one cared about him, no one would come to the Oregon Coast looking for him. He had changed his name, and he was twenty years older.

He hadn't made a mistake since.

"I've come from Ohio," the woman said. "I've been looking for you."

It was the tiny movement, the double clasp of her hands over her purse strap, the tension in her shoulders that made him realize she was afraid of him.

No one had ever been afraid of him, even after they had found out what he was. He was a small wizard with even smaller magics, not like his mentor who could have destroyed an entire town with the snap of a finger, or the crazed woman he'd met at a Nevada roadside twenty years before, who had burned up her entire family -- even the scattered members all over the country -- simply by cursing them.

"Looking for me?" he repeated, rather stupidly. He felt a flush build in his cheeks. Would the police still be interested, all these years later?

"Yes. Looking for you." She glanced around, her gaze stopping on the mass market items he kept for the tourists -- the cheap magic kits, the books on magic tricks, the pinwheels and the silly jewelry. "Are we alone here?"

"Except for Ruby," he said putting his hand on the cat's silken back. "But she knows all my secrets."

The woman looked at Ruby as if she were seeing the cat for the first time. "I was told by a man in New Orleans that you could help me."

Winston felt a bit of relief then. Many of his referrals came from New Orleans, from the voodoo shops and the tourist traps, places his shop had been modeled on. Many of his kind found a refuge on Bourbon street, where no one questioned oddity of any kind.

"Then he should have told you that you didn't have to come here," Winston said gently. "I do most of my business by mail."

Her gaze met his. The glasses distorted her eyes slightly, making the lashes larger than they should have been, the eyes bigger and more vulnerable.

She shook her head. "He said this was the one time I would have to come."

Winston moved closer. "What do you need?"

"I don't know," she said. "I thought you would."

His smile was small. This was why he hated having customers come in person. They expected more from him. They expected him to be like Gandalf the Great or like the wizards they'd seen on television. All knowing, all powerful, charismatic and forceful and strong.

"I'm afraid I'm not psychic," he said.

She sighed and loosened her grip slightly on her purse. "I know," she said. "I guess I was looking more for a solution, one I haven't been able to come up with."

He was silent. He didn't diagnose. He was like a pharmacist. Someone else diagnosed and prescribed. He fulfilled the order.

"The man in New Orleans said you were the most creative wizard he'd ever met. He said you'd know what to do."

The compliment didn't move him. "I have a small talent," he said. "Nothing that would warrant a trip from Ohio."

He turned his back on her and parted the beaded curtain. Ruby jumped off the counter and loped toward the back.

"Please," the woman said. "Just listen to me?"

Perhaps it was the plaintive note in her voice. Perhaps it was her beauty, hidden behind the inappropriate hairstyle and her severe clothing. Perhaps it was the way she moved, like a person who expected rejection from every place she turned.

He bowed his head. Ruby cursed softly, something about dogs and men and stupidity.

"All right," he said. "But I guess you'd best come back here."

He never let anyone inside his inner sanctum. For the nineteen years he'd owned the shop, ever since he'd arrived in Seavy Village, he'd been alone except for his familiars. First Buster, who arrived with the cliff house that Winston rented and finally bought, and now Ruby, who'd appeared the day after Buster died.

The woman held the beaded curtains apart and stared at the filled bottles, the careful labels, the cluttered worktable. It seemed to Winston that her skin had paled considerably.

"I don't think this is such a good idea after all," she said.

He waited. This was new for him as well.

After a moment, she let the curtains drop. They clicked against each other. He started to follow her, but Ruby moved in his path.

"That's trouble," Ruby said.

The bell over the door jangled, and then he heard the door click shut.

"She came all the way from Ohio," he said.

"Yeah," Ruby said, sarcasm in her tone. "By way of New Orleans."

He concentrated on his cat. Her yellow eyes filled her black face. "Do you even know where Ohio is?"

She bristled. "I watch t.v. , same as you."

He nodded, not quite sure how to take that, and let himself out the beaded curtains. The front of the shop felt emptier and colder than usual, and he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd made some kind of mistake.

* * * *

When the bell above his door jangled the next afternoon, Winston got off his stool and headed for the beaded curtain. Ruby watched him from her basket, her golden eyes hooded. She had said nothing the night before, and her silence showed her disapproval of the woman visitor. Ruby usually commented on everything.

Winston drew the beaded curtain back, an apology on his lips, when he stopped. A policeman stood there, looking uncomfortable.

His rumpled uniform proclaimed him a member of the small Seavy Village police force, but Winston had never seen him before. The man was red-headed, freckled, and young enough to be his son.

"Mr. Karpathian?" The young man stood in the center of the store, his cap beneath his arm like a recruit at graduation.

"Yes." Winston let the beaded curtain close behind him.

"Mind if I talk to you, sir?"

This was it, then. He had thought the statute of limitations was up, thought, perhaps, times had changed just enough. In his first days on his own, he had believed he didn't need a familiar to keep his magic from curdling. He had mixed potions and fulfilled orders, but they had spoiled. A young woman who had special ordered an aphrodisiac nearly died. Fortunately her boyfriend hadn't tried it, and he had gotten her to the emergency room. The cops thought it a drug overdose, and thought Winston the supplier. He had left San Francisco on a dead run, stopping only when he saw Seavy Village and its gothic landscape.

"Sir?"

He realized he hadn't answered, hadn't done anything except stare into space like a man numbed by time.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You had a question?"

"Yes, sir." The policeman glanced at the glistening glass bottles, and then took a step forward.

"Yesterday, did a woman come to see you? From Ohio?"

Winston felt his shoulders relax slightly. Ruby leaned against his lower leg. He hadn't even realized she had come out of the back room.

"Yes."

He still couldn't bring himself to offer information to the police. Perhaps it was his natural caution, perhaps it was his generation, or perhaps it was that experience in San Francisco, which taught him he would always be misjudged.

"Is this her?" The officer held what looked to be a blow-up of a driver's license photo. The woman in it didn't wear glasses, and her hair flowed about her shoulders, but she had that stricken look most people got before the flash at the DMV.

"Yes," Winston said, still not sure what this was about.

"Trouble," Ruby whispered from the floor.

The officer frowned, just a bit, as if he had heard something, but didn't know what. "She was found dead in her hotel room this morning, sir."

Winston drew in his breath, and gripped the edge of the counter. I didn't do it, he wanted to say. I didn't sell her anything. I only spoke to her for a few minutes.

"What happened?" he managed to ask.

"It was murder," the officer said. "But we're not releasing any of the details."

Winston nodded, as if he understood that when, in truth, he didn't. "I'm sorry."

"Did you know her well?"

Winston shook his head. He felt slightly sluggish. He didn't want to leave Seavy Village. He'd lived here too long. But he didn't want to be associated with a murder. He couldn't afford to have attention drawn to himself.

"She came into my shop for the first time yesterday," he said. "I didn't even know her name."

"Her name was Gwen Winnick," the officer said, as if that should jog Winston's memory. It did not. All it did was made him think, sadly, that her name didn't suit her. "She had your name in a notebook. She had circled it."

He nodded. As much truth as possible, then. It was the only thing he could do. "She said she had come all the way from Ohio to see me."

"Why would she do that?"

Winston shrugged. "She never told me. She said a man in New Orleans gave her my name."

"A Boyce Theriot?"

Boyce. Of course. They had exchanged a lot of business over the years. "I don't know," Winston said. "She didn't tell me that either."

"What did she tell you?"

"That she had come from Ohio, looking for me." Ruby was leaning hard against him now. A warning? Or support? "That she needed some sort of advice. I told her I didn't give advice, and that I did most of my work by mail order. She said she'd still like to ask me something, so I invited her into my workroom in the back. She opened the beaded curtains and stopped, said she couldn't do this after all, and left."

"That was it?"

Winston nodded.

"She came all the way from Ohio and then turned away at the last moment?"

"To be honest," Winston said, "I kinda thought you were her. I expected her to come back."

"Why?"

"For that very reason. Because she had come so far."

The officer nodded. "You never saw her before?"

"No."

"Ever been to Ohio?"

"No."

"Did she tell you someone was following her?"

"No." Winston frowned. "Was someone?"

"Apparently. That's what she told the desk clerk. Under no circumstances was he to let anyone in her room." The officer flushed slightly as if he'd said too much. He stared at the pinwheels, then looked at Winston. "What kind of store is this anyway?"

"A magic shop," Winston said. "It's for the tourists, mostly."

That was what he told all the locals. Most of them bought it.

"Then what do you do mail order?"

Winston smiled. His smile was the soft, practiced one he gave to people who wouldn't understand, people he didn't want to ask any more questions. "I send out spells."

"Spells?"

Winston nodded. "You know," he said. "Specialized tricks." He could say that without lying because he did send out a few, usually to a tourist who had stopped in during the summer, and wanted to learn a few special moves to impress the neighborhood children or the bar crowd.

"Oh," the officer said. "There's money in that?"

"Enough to take care of me and Ruby."

"Ruby?"

"My cat," Winston said.

The officer looked down. "She's got marvelous eyes," he said, crouching and holding out his hand. "I've never seen eyes like that on a cat before."

Ruby sat up and stared at him. Winston knew the posture. It was the one she always used when humans treated her like an animal instead of a person.

"She's not a friendly one, is she?" The officer stood. "I would have thought she was, being a store cat."

"She's only six months old," Winston said.

The officer nodded as if that explained everything. The tip of Ruby's tail twitched.

"You've been here a long time," the officer said.

"Almost twenty years."

"Most people have no idea what you do."

Winston looked at him, trying to see if the young man was probing or just making a statement. "I keep to myself."

"Any reason for that?"

Half a dozen, none of which you would believe, Winston thought. But he said, "Habit."

"Hmm." The officer turned, started for the door.

"I didn't catch your name, Officer."

The officer stopped, picked up a bottle and turned it over in his fingers. "Park. Scott Park."

"Should I be hiring a lawyer, Officer Scott Park?"

Park turned. There was something in his green eyes. Something cold and a little wary. Something that made him seem older. "Not yet."

And then he let himself out.

Winston waited until Park walked past the dirty display windows, then leaned against the counter.

"Not yet?" Ruby said, her voice rising with indignation. "Not yet? That's means yes in police talk, doesn't it?"

"It means maybe," Winston said.

"I watch television. It means I'm looking for evidence."

"Television isn't real life, Ruby."

"And your rules are silly ones. Hire someone, will you?"

Winston shook his head. He wasn't ready to hire anyone. In a world filled with fingerprints, hair fibers and DNA testing, it was a long way from suspicion to arrest.

"I don't think this is such a good idea after all," she said to him.

"Sure it is," he said in his imagination. "Come sit with me. We'll figure it out."

But he hadn't said that. He hadn't reassured her, hadn't taken care of her. He had let her leave, and she had died.

He had small magics. What had she thought he could do?

There was only one way to find out.

* * * *

He placed the call from his store. Ruby already had him thinking of covering himself, of a future trial that might or might not happen. He could say on the stand in his own defense -- honestly and rightly -- that he called Boyce Theriot to gossip, and to place a long overdue order for some ingredients for his love potions, ingredients Theriot sold cheaper than anyone else, thanks to the large voodoo culture in New Orleans.

Boyce answered the phone, his customary "Good Afternoon," spoken with its combination of Southern warmth mixed with Bourbon street disinterest. Winston introduced himself, and Boyce said, "I spoke to a police officer about you this mornin'. He asked me if you had a history of assaultin' young women. Do you have a history, Winston?"

Winston couldn't tell if Boyce was teasing or not. They'd only met briefly, in San Francisco, twenty-five years before. Both had been apprentices, and both had been very, very different. Even at twenty, Boyce had been a sophisticated and charming mixture of cold disinterest and sudden warmth.

"Who was she?" Winston asked.

"Why, you should know that by now."

"I just spoke to the police. She was Gwen Winnick from Ohio. And that's all I know."

"Not all," Boyce said. "If that was all, you wouldn't be callin' me, now would you?"

"She told me that a man in New Orleans had sent her to me. The cop was the one who gave me your name."

"And did you help her?"

"She ran away before I even found out what the trouble was."

Boyce let out a small breath. "Little brown wren, right to the very end."

She had dressed like a brown wren. But she had been beautiful. For some reason, the comment irritated Winston. "Why'd you send her to me?"

"She'd been doin' lots of research on lots of things. It brought her to me. I sent her to you."

"No games, Boyce," Winston said. "She came to me, and I didn't help her, and now she's dead. What did she want?"

"Do you know anyone in Ohio?"

Winston sighed. "No."

"Neither do I, but someone there did somethin' awful to that poor girl. Seems she was in a car accident, and it left a long pucker on her cheek that she thought kept other people from her. Happened when she was just a little thing. She tried conventional methods, you know, surgeries and all, and they made it better but didn't make it go away."

"You saw it?" Winston asked.

"This here's just what she told me." Boyce spoke in a tone that said he didn't really believe her. He would have done as any good white magician would have done, helped her realize her problem was more a lack of confidence than a single scar alongside her face.

"So she went to see someone."

"She went to see someone in Ohio," Boyce said. "Wouldn't tell me his name. Said it was best all 'round if she never spoke it again."

"I don't like the sound of that," Winston said.

"Neither did I, but it was too late, even then, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," Winston said. Ruby jumped on his desk and pawed at the phone cord. Winston put a finger to his lips. She gave him a look that showed her displeasure -- she clearly wanted him to share the call now -- but she sat down and waited. "What did she ask for? An illusion spell?"

"Somethin' to cover the scar -- make her normal, she said. Maybe even pretty, she said."

Probably wistfully, Winston thought.

"And he did, and when she left, people were staring at her, just like they always had, so she thought it hadn't worked."

"Until she looked in the mirror."

Boyce said, "But it wasn't an illusion spell. It was a beauty spell, and he mixed it with some kind of attraction potion. Suddenly the girl who couldn't get anyone to be with her couldn't get anyone to leave her alone."

Winston shuddered. Nothing seemed worse to him than unwanted attention.

"Why didn't she get him to reverse it?" he asked.

"She tried. He called her ungrateful, and cursed her, saying she would suffer it for the rest of her life."

And she had.

"You have no idea who he was."

"None."

Winston sighed. "So she came to you."

"After maybe fifty others. No one could reverse it. Includin' me."

"So why'd you send her to me? I don't have half your magic."

"All I could think of was a potion," Boyce said. "A sort of antidote. Something she could take every day to nullify the effects. I certainly couldn't do that, but you could."

Winston's stomach clenched. "I don't know."

"Well, that was the point of havin' her see you. I figured you'd keep trying till you came up with somethin' that worked."

Winston was silent for a moment. Ruby tilted her head slightly. He would have. Yes. He would have.

"She stopped at the door to my lab," Winston said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"She wouldn't come into my lab either," Boyce said. "Maybe she'd been in one too many."

"I don't know," Winston said. "It seemed like she was scared."

"She's dead, ain't she?" Boyce's voice was soft, full of regret. "Maybe she had her reasons."

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Her reasons. Winston couldn't get that phrase out of his mind. He went through the next few days with a sort of watchful numbness: filling his orders, taking care of Ruby, following his routine. In his spare time, though, he found himself tinkering with a potion that would neutralize both a beauty and an attraction spell, a potion he would never ever sell, never ever use.

Ruby watched him with a sort of sadness in her eyes.

On the fourth day, she sprawled across his worktable, her hind feet pushing against some of his more expensive potion bottles. He caught the bottles and put them on a shelf behind her.

She had his attention now. "What do you know about beauty spells, Big Boy?"

He shrugged. "The basics. And enough to know I can't do them."

She nodded, her golden eyes narrowing. She knew something, something she expected him to understand. "Aren't they incredibly nasty spells?"

He frowned. "It depends."

"On?"

He felt as if he were back in his mentor's lab, listening to lectures on magic. He hated quizzes. He'd always done so poorly at them. "I guess it depends on who writes the spell and how long it lasts."

She blinked at him. Her sphinx look.

"You have no proof that Gwen's spell was black magic," he said, "or nasty in any way."

"Proof." Ruby rumbled the word. "I have enough. For me."

"For you," he said, leaving off, but implying the last: _You're a cat_.

She heard it anyway, and stood, licking her shoulder as she often did when she was offended. Then she sat down and wrapped her tail around her front paws.

"Think it through, Big Boy. A curse that the spell will last all her life. A mage who refuses to reverse his own spell. A mage who adds another spell, and gets angry when the client says it goes awry. That doesn't make for good business, does it?"

"We only have Boyce's word for this, a story he got second-hand."

"And her fear." Ruby's tail twitched. "What would make a woman afraid of a simple lab in the back of a store? Not you. And not me. Maybe the bottles of potion? The jars of ingredients? The smell?"

"She'd clearly been in a lab before," Winston said.

"Yes," Ruby said, "and look where it got her."

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In the end, he decided, as he always had, that it was none of his business. His business was simple, it was small, it had only to do with him and Ruby and the clients he never met. He did his work in peace, and he never bothered anyone. He went to his stone house on the cliffside, built fires against the cold, rainy nights, and listened to the ocean pound the beach below.

He tried not think of Gwen, just like he tried not to think of that girl in San Francisco, the one who had almost died.

It was nearly March when the bell above the door tinkled again. That day's rain was a light mist, slanted sideways, annoying only because it made a man wet in the space of five minutes. People didn't shop in that kind of weather; they didn't browse either, and Winston knew, with that subtle certainty he sometimes got, that his visitor had come because of Gwen Winnick.

He wiped his hands on his work towel and hung it over the small sink. Then he pulled back the beaded curtain.

Officer Scott Park stood there, his uniform beaded with moisture, his red hair curly with damp. "You have an interesting Internet site."

Winston froze. Only Ruby moved forward, her tail held high, as if she really were a store cat who wanted to greet a customer.

Park hadn't removed his hat this time. And he had lost his deferential manner. He tilted his head slightly. "Do you think a person's lying when he answer someone's questions and leaves things out? Or do you simply believe that it's the job of the questioner to ask the right question?"

Winston's heart was pounding. He had to keep himself from speaking. If he opened his mouth, he would say that he had never seen her before, that he hadn't given her a potion. He had a familiar this time, so it wouldn't have mattered if he sold her something or not. This time, he would say, he was innocent.

"Mr. Karpathian?"

Winston blinked. He had to think. Ruby sat down and looked at him over her shoulder.

"Do I need a lawyer, Officer Scott Park?" Winston asked softly.

Ruby's tail twitched, ever so slightly.

Park's eyes narrowed. He hadn't expected Winston to say that. "No," Park said at last. "We know who killed Gwen Winnick."

"Then why have you come to me?"

"Because I looked at your website. I think you might be able to explain some things to me, things that don't make sense." Park shifted from one foot to the other, showing his discomfort. Perhaps that was why he had been so forceful a moment before. To hide the fact he was asking a wizard to consult on a case. "Would you come to the station?"

"No." Even with in that short word, Winston's voice shook.

"It's easier," Park said. "Everything's there."

Winston sighed. "All right," he said. "But Ruby comes too."

Park glanced at her. "It's a strange place. You sure it won't frighten her?"

"She's used to strange places," Winston said. "She'll be fine."

* * * *

Winston drove the Gremlin to the police station in the center of town. The car was now belching blue smoke, and he knew it wouldn't last much longer. He wanted a car with a magical name, but he doubted he would find one, not in the bright new century with its focus on the future.

Ruby hid beneath the dash. She didn't like the idea of Winston going to the station, she didn't like Officer Park, and she hadn't liked Gwen. Ruby hadn't voiced her opinions, but she didn't need to. She thought Winston was taking an unnecessary risk.

The station was a new fake brick construct near the Factory Outlet mall. There was a spacious parking lot near a grove of trees, and that lent the place a certain privacy Winston had never seen in a police station before.

He went inside, Ruby at his heels, to find Park waiting for him near what looked like a reception area. There were plants and double-paned windows which he had read in the local paper were bullet proof. The only thing that made it look like a police station at all was the double-reinforced steel door leading to the back.

"This sure ain't Hill Street Blues," Ruby said under her breath. Only Winston heard her. But that was enough. He had to choke back a smile, and then he vowed to stop watching so much television in the evening.

"I think you better carry her," Park said, looking at Ruby. "There's a lot of coming and going around here. It might spook her."

Winston's gaze met Ruby's and hers had warning in it. But he picked her up anyway, not because he was afraid she'd be spooked but because he worried that she would go exploring on her own.

They walked through the double doors into a mazelike corridor. Park let him to an office toward the back. It had a view of the trees, although the glass seemed to let in almost no light at all. The desk was covered with files, and toasters flew across the screen of the old computer sitting atop the credenza.

Park closed the door and sat behind the desk. Winston took the only chair in front of it. Ruby jumped out of his arms and began pacing the room as if she were under arrest.

"Okay," Park said. "First, I've got to ask, more for me than anyone else, those folks who order your love potions and aphrodisiacs and 'perfect day' spells, do they actually believe that stuff will work or are they doing it as a gag?"

Ruby stopped pacing. Winston felt his shoulders tense. He could lie, he supposed, but what good would it do? "I think they believe."

"Do you?" Park asked.

"I guess I do," Winston said.

Park frowned, as if that wasn't the answer he expected. "Do you think Gwen Winnick believed?"

Winston nodded. "Enough to frighten her from my lab, I think."

"Why? Would you have hurt her?"

"No." Winston's denial was soft. "But she might have gotten hurt in someone else's lab. It seemed like it."

"So the stuff I read in books, about white magic and black magic, that's true?"

"In its way," Winston said. "There are those of us who do small things, favors almost, always pleasant, and then there are those who do bigger things, rarely favorable, almost always unpleasant."

"How do I tell the difference?"

Winston shrugged. "By feel I guess. If you're not comfortable, you don't do business with someone."

"People can tell that on the internet?"

"No." He threaded his fingers together. It still felt like he needed a lawyer.

Park sighed and walked to the window. Ruby followed him and jumped on the sill. She sat down in front of him, and let him pet her. She rarely did real cat things like that. Maybe she was afraid he'd arrest Winston too.

"Okay," Park said after a moment. "I'm going to ask you to consult on this case. We can pay you a token amount. But you have to swear you won't discuss the details of the case unless you're before a court of law."

"I can promise that." Relief made him slightly dizzy. He must have been forgetting to breathe. "Why do you need me?"

"Because you understand this world and I don't. I probably never will." Park scratched Ruby's back and she arched in pleasure. She shot Winston a glance to see if he was watching. He was and he felt vaguely jealous.

Then Park patted Ruby's back and returned to his desk. "The police in Astoria arrested a man for starting an illegal bonfire on the beach, and found that he matched the description we'd released of Gwen's killer. They also found some things that they thought might be hers and, they said, he seemed to be performing a ritual of some sort with them."

Ruby sat down and stared out the window as if the news didn't concern her at all, but her ears went flat back. Winston frowned. No rituals should be performed around the first of March. Any sensible mage would wait until solstice, and then not do it on the beach.

"He was quite upset when they arrested him, saying someone else would suffer if he didn't finish. They thought he was threatening someone and put him in isolation until we could get there." Park ran a hand through his hair. "It wasn't until we got him that we realized he thought his failure to finish the ritual meant someone else would live in pain forever."

"Did he say pain?" Winston asked.

Park shook his head slightly. "He said suffer."

Winston nodded.

"What does this mean to you?" Park asked.

"What exactly was he doing?" Winston asked.

Park gathered some photos from the top drawer of his desk. "He had a blazing fire going at twilight, and he had some powders we can't identify. He also had two dolls, one with the victim's photograph taped to it, and another with another woman's. He had placed them in boiling water, and he was carefully mixing two vials of what later turned out to be blood, one from the victim, and one from someone we can't identify."

"This isn't enough to convict?" Winston asked.

"It's not your garden variety murder," Park said, "It looks like an act of passion, until you factor in the blood. It looks premeditated, until you look at the opportunities he must have had earlier, since we can document that he followed her from Ohio. She was running from him in particular. If we made this sound random, the defense would prove us wrong. If we made it sound premeditated without any motive -- and we can't find one --, he'll plead insanity, and it'll stick."

"I didn't know police worried about motives and proving court cases," Winston said.

Ruby huffed. Apparently she knew, from her vast television watching experience.

"I think this guy is a real danger. I want him put away." There was fervor in his voice, a certain hunching about his shoulders. Something that made this case mean more to Park than solving Gwen Winnick's murder.

"You've had a case like this before," Winston said. "And lost."

Park looked down. He no longer looked young. There were lines around his eyes. "In Seattle," he said. "When I worked at a real police force."

That was the joke, of course. Seavy Village's force was small and rarely did more than vandalism, drug possession cases, and traffic stops. Seattle handled everything from vice to murder.

"It was something similar, same kind of creepy behavior, only he walked. We set up a murder one case, no motive, and the jury came back with reasonable doubt. I figure there are some people out there who died because we -- I -- fucked up the case."

"And that's why you're in Seavy Village," Winston said.

Park's eyes were old. How had Winston not noticed that before? The age in them was the result of guilt, not of years.

Winston considered for a moment. He could walk, even now. But he wouldn't. Each man had his own reasons for solving this case. They needed each other.

Winston considered for a moment, then he said, "Ruby. Explain to Officer Park what the man was doing."

Park looked at Winston as if he were insane. Ruby's entire body went still. Then she jumped from the sill to the desk, and looked in Park's face. "Do you believe in magic, Big Boy?"

"No," Park said, frowning at Winston as if he were doing a ventriloquist act.

"Well, you will," Ruby said. "Believe me. You will."

* * * *

"He didn't believe me," Ruby said, from her spot under the dashboard.

"He believed in you," Winston said. "That's more than I would expect."

"Yes, and now the whole town will come to see your talking cat."

He couldn't tell if she sounded excited or disappointed. Probably neither.

"I don't think so," he said. "No police officer would want a town as small as this one to think he's seeing talking cats."

"Good point," Ruby said. "But he still didn't believe me."

"We gave him an argument, a motive."

"I won't testify in court." She said that as if someone were going to ask her, as if she were turning them down.

Winston smiled, and flicked on the windshield wipers. The mist was continuing, steady, heavier than expected. "I'm sure I can take care of that part."

"Then why did you have me talk to him in the first place?"

"So he wouldn't question the magic."

"Other people will."

"Other people need to know that the suspect believes in magic, that's all."

Ruby sighed and laid down. "Human justice is so complicated. Just beat the crap out of the guy and throw him out of society. Or kill him. It's so much easier."

"And so much less civilized."

"Oh, I forgot. We must keep up the pretense to civility at all times." She said that last with a fake British accent. "Now what? Old Park isn't going to want to talk to us again."

"No," Winston said. "He's solved his problem."

He could feel Ruby's scrutiny.

"And?" she asked.

"We're not even close to solving ours."

"I didn't know we had one."

He pulled the car into its spot behind his shop, and opened his door. Ruby zoomed out of it, dashing so quickly across puddles that he doubted she touched them at all. She huddled against the back door of the shop and he unlocked it, letting her in.

It seemed so familiar, and so warm. His place. He had risked it, by letting Ruby talk to Park. Fortunately he hadn't misjudged the man, a man with enough curiosity to save them all. Winston had given Park a motive, and Park had given Winston a headache.

Winston closed the door, and leaned on it. He would have explained what happened to Park, except that it sounded too unbelievable, too crazy. And Winston placed a value on sounding sane.

So he had let Ruby speak. After a few sentences, when Winston had excused himself and gone to the men's room, Park started to believe. By the time Winston came back, Park believed entirely and seemed at a complete loss as to what to do -- about Ruby, not the case. Winston helped him with that last part.

It was so simple and so sad. The suspect -- the murder -- was named Eugene Grimsrud. His fiance was one of the most beautiful women in Columbus, and she had had a run-in with "a crazy man" at one of the local art fairs. Apparently, the crazy man had decided to get back at her. One morning, she woke up, her face shriveled and misshapen, her eyes too big, her nose so small as to be nonexistent, her teeth crooked and yellow. Doctor after doctor couldn't explain it.

At least, that was what Grimsrud had said. It wasn't until the crazy man had shown up at their door to see his "handiwork" that they began to understand that the force they dealt with had nothing to do with modern medicine and everything to do with one of the darker forms of magic.

That was the suspect's story, which Park told them after he heard Ruby talk. All Ruby had said was this: it was clear Grimsrud was trying to reverse a beauty spell. Beauty spells, done by dark practitioners, take the essence one person's beauty and give it to someone else. Such a spell is reversed by mixing the blood of the two, and boiling it over a real fire at twilight. Dolls placed in the water had to have pictures of each person -- as they originally were -- and those pictures would guide the spirits to put things right.

Grimsrud had taken no chances. He even had a magic charm to help. But it hadn't. For Grimsrud had no magic of his own, and didn't know there were rules other than the ones he'd been told.

All magic gained more power on the solstice.

And a successful spell reversal was impossible, whenever one of the parties to the original spell was dead.

Grimsrud's fiance was doomed to wear her new face forever.

Unless Winston could come with something that even he, with his small magics, could perform.

For that, Winston needed the answers to a few questions.

For that, Winston needed to speak to Grimsrud.

* * * *

Park arranged it, against his will. But, Winston said, it might help with the consult. It also, Winston said, would help if he knew the details of the murder.

The papers had been vague about it. Woman found dead in her hotel room, attacked by stalker. People in nearby rooms heard screaming, shouting, and by the time the police arrived, she was dead and he was gone.

Dead. Beaten about the face and shoulders with a blunt object. Skull crushed. Murdered, it seemed, in a rage.

And Grimsrud looked like a man who could kill that way. He sat in one of the fancy new cells in the back of the new police station, waiting to be sent somewhere else to await trial. He was large and bony in a rangy sort of way. His eyes had an edge to them, the look of a man no longer quite sane.

Winston was glad he hadn't brought Ruby with him. He was glad she wouldn't have a chance to worm her way into the cell, and let that man touch her.

"So you're one of them," Grimsrud said. "Like Hubble."

"Hubble?"

"The man who ruined my Kelly's face."

"Does Hubble have a last name?" Winston asked. He couldn't do much: just report the unorthodox methods to his colleagues, and see if someone stronger, someone with more magic, decided to pursue punishment.

"Pierce."

Winston nodded, took note, and then folded his hands behind his back.

"You're like him, aren't you?"

"No," Winston said. "I don't hurt people."

Grimsrud winced. The expression seemed off somehow, as if it weren't natural.

"Tell me about your fiance," Winston said.

"Why?" Grimsrud asked.

"So that I can see if I can help her."

"Why would you do that for me?"

It was a strange question, more self-absorbed than Winston expected. "I wouldn't," he said. "But by killing Gwen, you've stranded your girlfriend, you know, made it impossible for anyone to reverse the spell."

Something flickered in Grimsrud's eyes. Hatred? Remorse? It was impossible to tell. "I didn't plan that."

The murder? The impossibility of reversal? Winston didn't know, wasn't sure he wanted to. "You didn't plan to strand your fiance?"

"She's not my fiance any more. She couldn't stand it, to have someone see her like that, especially me."

A shiver ran through Winston. "Is she dead too?"

Grimsrud shook his head and lowered his gaze. "I think she might want to be," he said.

Winston stiffened. Something in Grimsrud's tone, something in his manner, made him pause. Black magic was so beyond him. He almost wished Ruby were here, to listen to this. To figure out what lurked.

"Would she come here?" Winston asked. "Maybe stand by you in trial?"

Grimsrud shook his head. "She says I'm no longer the man she loved."

Winston understood that. "At least give me her name, so that I can help her."

Grimsrud frowned. "What can you do, now that I -- that Gwen's dead?"

Winston thought of the potion, sitting on his desk. A few tweaks and it might work the other way, it might make a woman who lost her looks regain them. "Probably nothing," he said. "But it is worth a try."

* * * *

He left with fiance Kelly's last name, and a headache so fierce he doubted any spell could cure it. His stomach was in knots. The drive home was longer than usual, and by the time he got in the house, he was almost physically ill.

"I wouldn't have gone in the cell," Ruby said. She was sitting on the rug in front of the fireplace, waiting, he knew, for a real fire. No little snap of the fingers and magical sparks for her.

She would have to wait a moment. He was feeling faint.

"So he killed her, huh?" Ruby asked, studying his face.

Winston nodded.

"Why?"

Winston swallowed. "We didn't get to that."

"But you suspect something."

If he remembered his spellcasting correctly. "Tell me, Ruby," he said. "What happens if a reversal spell succeeds and one of the parties is dead?"

Ruby twitched one ear, a sign of annoyance. She hated it when he didn't remember the details of spells. "The other one dies too."

"I thought so," he whispered. He bowed his head, felt the tension in his neck muscles.

"He wasn't getting revenge for his girl friend's disfigurement," Ruby said.

"No." Winston raised his head. "He was getting a different kind of revenge."

Ruby was standing now, concern on her feline face, concern that vanished when she realized he was looking at her. "For her rejection of him."

Winston nodded. "I'll bet he used Gwen, convinced her that magic would change her life, and then he killed her."

"He didn't expect to get caught?" Ruby asked.

"Oh, he did," Winston said, "but not until after he succeeded. He just hadn't counted on how much of a difference magical ability makes."

"And how badly he needed the solstice." Ruby approached him cautiously, her tail up, her face gentle. "What are you going to do?"

"Help Park nail this bastard."

"And what else?" Ruby asked.

Winston shook his head. "The mage was Hubble Pierce. He probably did the spell for money. He wouldn't reverse it for Gwen. He won't reverse it for me."

Ruby was silent. Winston thought there was judgment in that silence.

"What else can I do?" he asked. "If I fly to Ohio, she won't see me because I'm from here where Grimsrud killed Gwen. She won't see me because I have magic. If I contact her, she won't trust me for the same reasons. And if I tried to help her, I'd fail."

"No," Ruby said. "You wouldn't fail."

Winston looked at her. She seemed less like a cat now. More like a familiar. Like she was tapping into an area he didn't quite understand.

"What do you suggest?" he asked. "I can't leave this woman, this Kelly, a victim of Grimsrud's revenge."

"What do I suggest?" Ruby asked. She tilted her head as if listening to a voice inside her. Then her whiskers twitched. If she were human, Winston would have thought he saw the trace of a smile.

"I suggest," she said slowly, "the subtle approach."

"And that is?"

"Temptation," Ruby said. "Something no sane woman can ever resist."

* * * *

At first Winston thought it wouldn't work. He thought any woman -- any person -- who'd been injured by magic would reject magic out of hand. But he sent Kelly flyers advertising his website, and then he sent offers for free samples. He got testimonials from a few clients, and built a small newsletter -- which he liked so much he sent it to other clients, and found that they passed it on.

For months, he tried, and for months, he did not hear. A year went by. Grimsrud had his day in court, and was presented as a psychopath who dabbled in black magic. Winston did not have to testify, but he read his words in the prosecutor's case, saw how his insights -- minus the fact that magic really did exist -- created the motive that brought Grimsrud down. There was no mention of a beauty spell, no mention of reversal, no mention of Kelly at all. Just of craziness and witchcraft and destruction.

It was enough to put Grimsrud away for life.

And to make Park, who occasionally bought Winston lunch along with salmon for Ruby, lose some of the sadness around his eyes.

But the true victim, the one Winston had never seen, the one he had only imagined, remained out of reach.

Until one afternoon in late February. It was Tuesday, and it was raining -- the hard cold downpour that made all but the hardiest locals complain. Winston was working in the back of his shop, when he heard the bell above the door tinkle. He looked at Ruby; she looked at him, and he knew they were remembering a February Tuesday one year ago, a day they both hadn't yet put behind them.

This time, he stood, and opened the beaded curtain. A woman stood near the dirty display window, studying a shelf of cut glass potion bottles. She looked up when she saw him. She was slight, with mismatched blue eyes. Her dark hair fell in waves about her face. She wore a lot of makeup, but it didn't hide the fact that she was one of the homeliest women he'd ever seen.

"Are you Winston?" she asked.

He nodded, his heart in his throat.

"I've done some checking up on you."

He waited.

"Everyone seems to like you."

He smiled a little and almost made a self-deprecating remark, then remembered how fragile trust could be. "I'm glad to hear it."

"They say you have never harmed anyone in your life."

He wished that were true.

She raised her chin. "You know who I am."

"Kelly," he said.

She nodded. Her movements were graceful, where Gwen's had been awkward. "You think you can help me?"

"Yes," he said.

"I hear you have only a small magic."

She had checked on him. Of course. She would be very, very cautious.

Ruby came out of the back. She leapt onto the counter and sprawled across it, the picture of relaxation.

"It's very small," Winston said. "And I won't pretend to try to reverse your enchantment. But I can block it, for a day."

"A day."

He could hear the disappointment in her voice. She shook her head slightly. "To gain my face back for a day --" her voice broke a little. "I know you mean well, Mr. Karpathian. But I'm finally getting used to

this."

"Not _one_ day," he said. "_A_ day. Every day. One day at a time."

He was making no sense, as usual.

"I make potions. You'd take a potion every 24 hours, and no one would need to know that you once looked like this."

Her smile was small, almost invisible. "They already know, Mr. Karpathian."

"In Ohio."

A frown formed on her face. He had her attention now. He could see the temptation, and the unwillingness to believe. "What do I get? Someone else's face? Would I be forced to pass the misery along?"

"No," he said. "The potion simply blocks the enchantment for a few hours. During that time, you'll have your own face again."

She put a hand on the edge of the counter, and it took him a moment to realize she was holding herself up.

"I want to say no to you, Mr. Karpathian." Her voice was soft. "How I look, it shouldn't matter that much. If I've learned anything these last few years, it's that."

"I won't make you beautiful," he said. "and you'll age, as you would have before. I'm just giving you, for a day at a time, what's rightfully yours. What was stolen from you."

A wealth of emotions crossed her face. Temptation. Joy. And then a sadness that she couldn't seem to shake.

"The face I used to hurt Gene Grimsrud," she said softly. "The face I thought made me better than everyone else."

"Did it?" Winston asked.

She shook her head.

"Would you believe it again?"

"It's not that simple," she said. "Perhaps now I wear the face I deserve."

He didn't argue the point because he didn't know her. Ruby was watching him and he wondered if he were missing another opportunity, if he were making another mistake.

"It's not something you have to decide today," he said. "I'll keep some on hand. You can come to me whenever you like."

Kelly stared at him for a moment. "Why?" she whispered. "Why me?"

He wasn't thinking of her. Instead, he was thinking of a woman so beautiful she felt she had to hide it, a woman who only wanted the face she'd been born with, not the one that had been stolen for her at such great cost.

"Because I have only a little magic," he said. "And very rarely does it give me the chance to do things right."

This time she really smiled. It didn't make her pretty, but it brought her features together into something better than they had been before.

"You're a good man, Mr. Karpathian," she said. "With a beautiful cat."

Ruby preened, but Kelly made no move toward her.

"I'll think about your gift," she said, in a tone that let him know she already had. She started for the door, and stopped with her hand on the knob. Her gaze met his. In it, he saw something soft and grateful and sad.

"Thank you," she said.

And then she slipped out, into the rain.

The shop seemed emptier without her. Ruby rolled over on her back. "I thought she'd go for it."

Winston took one step forward. "Maybe she would have -- once."

Ruby sighed and rolled again. "She doesn't know what she's missing."

"Oh," Winston said. "I think she does."

Ruby gave him a small feline frown and closed her eyes. His familiar was too young to realize that Kelly needed the chance to regain her beauty, not the beauty itself.

Just like he had needed this day. He'd needed her to come, if only for a brief moment in the space of a rainy afternoon.

He stared at the door, the small bell on top, eloquent in its silence. Then he turned away from the rain, from the gloomy February afternoon, and went through the beaded curtains into his lab. Into the place where he spent most of his life, practicing his very small magic, for people he never met -- and never would.